

# WHAT DOES THE UNCONSCIOUS KNOW ABOUT WOMEN?



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The title chosen for this chapter, “What does the unconscious know about women?” makes sense to the extent that the unconscious is a kind of knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge once it is deciphered and interpreted on the basis of what the analysand (male or female) says.

I could answer the question this title asks immediately, but that would not reduce the suspense: the unconscious does not know everything, but what it knows is sufficient for us to analyze women.

## FREUD AND FEMININITY

Freud’s discoveries regarding sexuality were not welcomed in the culture at large. We might wonder why this was so. People usually refer to the customs of the time, but that is not necessarily the only reason. In any case, it is well known that Freud was accused of pansexualism, of finding sex everywhere. It is a curious pansexualism because, in fact, it does not involve the fairer sex, French designating the latter as *le sexe*—that is, as Sex itself. In deciphering the unconscious, Freud never found a term with which to inscribe feminine difference. This is quite striking. Instead, he put forward three major categories with which to situate sexuality.

As early as 1905, he discovered the drives, but in the form of partial drives, hence, the idea of “polymorphous perversion,” which means that there is no genital drive in the unconscious. Children certainly construct sexual theories—namely, theories of the relationship between the sexes—but they invent them on the basis of the partial drives with which they are familiar. These partial

drives have nothing to do with the difference between men and women; they exist in the little boy as well as in the little girl and leave unanswered the question of what distinguishes the essence of women.

Freud next noted the prevalence of a single formulation of sexual difference in anatomical terms, a formulation he consistently maintained: having or not having a penis. This led him to advance his main thesis, a scandalous one, stating that the subject's sexual identity forms on the basis of the fear of losing it for the one who has it, and the desire to have it for the one who is deprived of it. Making male and female development hinge upon the castration complex, Freud introduced, implicitly at least, the idea of a denaturing of sex in human beings. There is certainly a sexual being of the organism that cannot be reduced to anatomy, but it is nevertheless insufficient to constitute the sexual being of the subject. As proof of this, we have the fact that people constantly and quite openly worry about their degree of sexual conformity. Thus there is hardly a woman who is not preoccupied, at least periodically, with her true femininity and hardly a man who is not insecure about his virility.

Freud's third category explaining male and female development is the Oedipus complex, which he advances as a myth in order to account for both sexual taboos and ideals.

What then, according to Freud, is a woman? We know that he distinguishes three possible paths that have penis envy as their point of departure, only one of which he characterizes as truly feminine.<sup>1</sup> From this we can conclude the following: not all women are women. The word "women" obviously does not mean the same thing in its two different occurrences in this formulation. When we say "all women," it is the civil status definition that prevails. The latter is determined by one's anatomy at birth: if a child has a penis, we say "boy"; if not, we say "girl." But when we say "they are not all women," we are implicitly referring to an essence of femininity that escapes both one's anatomy and one's civil status, an essence whose origin remains to be determined. Freud's definition of this essence is clear; it derives from "being castrated": a woman is someone whose phallic lack causes her to turn to love for a man. The man here is at first the father, who himself inherits her love through a transfer of love that was originally addressed to the mother. In short, discovering that she is deprived of a penis, a little girl becomes a woman if she expects or waits [*attend*] to receive the phallus from the person who has it.

A woman is thus defined here solely by her partnership with a man, and the question is to determine what unconscious conditions permit a subject to consent or not consent to that partnership. This is where feminists protest, rejecting what they perceive to be a sexual hierarchy. The feminist objection did not begin with the contemporary women's liberation movement. It arose within Freud's own circle and was taken up by Ernest Jones. It was made in the name of a priori equality and denounced the injustice that would be committed if the absence of a penis were to be made the core of feminine being, thereby granting that being inferior status. To Freud's way of thinking, this

objection clearly falls under the heading of what he calls the phallic protest. That does not, however, tell us whether or not it is valid.

### LACAN AND FEMININITY

When Lacan reconsiders the problem some years later, after the debate pursued by Jones and others over the prevalence of the phallus in the unconscious aborted, he does not take the same position as Freud on femininity.

He nevertheless claims to embrace Freud's thesis wholeheartedly. If we read the first page of "The Signification of the Phallus," we see that Lacan vigorously reaffirms Freud's thesis about the importance of the castration complex in the unconscious and in sexual development. "We know," he says "that the unconscious castration complex functions as a knot, first in the dynamic structuring of symptoms [ . . . ], and second in regulating the development that gives its *ratio* to this first role: namely, the instating in the subject of an unconscious position without which he could not identify with the ideal type of his sex or even answer the needs of his partner in sexual relations without grave risk—much less appropriately meet the needs of the child who may be produced thereby" (*Écrits*, 685/281).<sup>2</sup> This is a categorically Freudian ideal: identification, the possibility of a heterosexual couple, and happy maternity are governed by the castration complex.

Lacan not only adopts Freud's thesis, he also justifies it. He makes a wager, a wager on Freud's position (*Écrits*, 688/284). He says that Freud's theses are so surprising and paradoxical that we must assume they forced themselves on he who alone was able to discover the unconscious, through the unique access he had to that unconscious. Lacan takes up, condenses, and clarifies Freud's thesis, striving all the while to grasp its intelligibility. It is not the penis that is involved, he says, but rather the phallus—that is, a signifier that, like any signifier, has its locus in the Other's discourse. Except for this change, which in certain respects changes everything in what he himself called "the debate over the phallus" (*Écrits*, 689/284), Freud and Lacan both affirm the "phallocentrism" of the unconscious. Lacan, however, goes further than Freud in his definition of feminine desire.

There are in fact two stages to his teachings on femininity. The first—a more Freudian stage—takes place in 1958, the year he writes "The Signification of the Phallus" (1958) and "Guiding Remarks for a Convention on Feminine Sexuality" (1960). His more innovative theses follow in 1972–1973 with "L'Étourdit"<sup>3</sup> and Seminar XX, *Encore*.

In "The Signification of the Phallus," although he professes his Freudian allegiance, Lacan already begins to rework Freud's terms—as, for example, when he states that the relations between the sexes "revolve around a being and a having" . . . the phallus (*Écrits*, 694/289). "Being the phallus" is an expression not found in Freud's work. It obviously transforms the binary opposition of "having or not having" to which Freud confined himself, although it does not

contradict it. Lacan's argument emphasizes rather that, in relations between the sexes, having or not having the *penis* only constitutes man or woman through a convention that amounts to having or being the *phallus*. This does not occur without the intervention of a seeming [*paraître*] animated by sexual ideals, and it has the contrasting function, on the one hand, of protecting the having and, on the other hand, of masking the lack thereof (ibid.). Freud emphasized the demand for love as characteristically feminine. Lacan, with a slight shift, suggests that in the relation of sexual desires, a woman's phallic lack is converted into a benefit of being . . . the phallus.

There is an implicit response to the feminist critique in these texts. More than a response, they situate the logic of that critique. But would feminists be satisfied to be given this phallic being? It is not clear, for if it is justified to affirm that a woman *is* the phallus, it is only at the level of her relation to man. The phallus, or being, is always for another, never in itself; this brings us back to her partnership with man, which Freud had stressed. Of course, Lacan emphasizes the relation to her desire rather than the demand she addresses to a man, but he maintains a definition of feminine being that involves the obligatory mediation of the opposite sex. If we ask what condemns her to this "relative" being, the answer can be found simply enough: in a heterosexual couple, the man's desire, indicated by his erection, is a necessary condition. The so-called sexual relationship puts masculine desire in a primary position. This is so true that without it there can be many kinds of erotic encounters, but not what we commonly call "making love." Accordingly, a woman, if she wants to inscribe herself in such a relationship, can only be called to the place of the correlate of his desire.

All of the formulations that Lacan provided to specify the place of "woman" make her a partner of the masculine subject: (1) being the phallus, that is, the representative of what man is missing; (2) being the object that serves as the cause of his desire; and (3) being his symptom upon which his jouissance is fixated. All of these define woman relative to man and say nothing of her own being but only of her being for the Other. This gap implicitly underpins Lacan's discussion in "Guiding Remarks," including his discussion of frigidity. One of the subjective conditions of frigidity seems to be imaginary identification with the "phallic standard" (*Écrits*, 733/95). One must conclude from this that if she is the phallus for the Other in a sexual relationship, she must not be it for herself through identification if she is to have her own jouissance.

The result is that everything that can be said about women is said from the point of view of the Other and only concerns semblance, their own being remaining, according to Lacan's expression, foreclosed from discourse.

### PLAYING THE PART . . .

Let us examine the function of "seeming" that I mentioned earlier and that instates the masquerade between the sexes. It constrains each of the partners to

put on an act, either to “play the part of the woman” or to “play the part of the man” (Seminar XX, 79/85). This dimension, which is quite obvious in everyday life, appears very early on in the education of young children, but in this respect, there is no symmetry between the sexes. Lacan also says about women, however, that we should “recall that images and symbols *in* women cannot be isolated from images and symbols *of* women” (*Écrits*, 728/90). We see that these “images and symbols” are early place holders for the term *semblance* [*semblant*] that Lacan introduced much later. But why say it of women rather than of men, for whom the Other’s verdicts also are quite important? Can we not object, without contradicting ourselves, that there also is a virile masquerade, a necessity, as I just said, to “play the part of a man”? This masquerade is present right from early childhood, because mothers, concerned about the future of their little cherubs, already judge them in relation to their ideal man and push them in general to incarnate the masculine standard. I say “in general” because there are exceptions, not to say anomalies. We come across mothers who push their boys to act like girls, to play the part of the “girl,” but this is not what is most frequent, and it is a function of the mother’s own pathology.

Lacan does not overlook this dimension in men. He even calls it “virile display” (*Écrits*, 695/291). It is not symmetrical to the feminine masquerade, however. In women, the agency of semblance is accentuated and even doubled insofar as their place in the sexual couple structurally requires them, in order to be the phallus, to don the colors—flaunted colors, I would be tempted to say—of the Other’s desire. Lacan even notes that virile display itself feminizes by revealing the regency of the Other’s desire (*ibid.*). The phallus is in fact a term that is always veiled, which means concretely that the conditions of desire are unconscious for each of us. An entire industry endeavors, in order to sustain the sexual market, to standardize the imaginary conditions of masculine desire’s fantasy. It succeeds in part, but the fact remains—and this is what psychoanalysis reveals—that for each person, there are particular conditions set by the unconscious. The result is that seduction is not a technique but perhaps an art, because it never concerns merely the automatic functions that the collective imaginary programs. The ability to “make [the Other] desire” that is characteristic of women does not escape interference by the unconscious, the latter not being collective. Their response is thus the masquerade that adjusts to the Other’s demands in order to captivate that unknown named desire.

I could mention here numerous clinical facts that are quite precise in terms of what women say—notably, a major complaint against the mother that consists in reproaching her for not having transmitted any feminine *savoir-faire* to her daughter. This complaint is not always direct, of course. It most often takes metonymic detours, which substitute one reproach for another. In the case of one particular woman, the complaint of not having learned the secrets of good cooking meant that the “trick” to attracting men had not been passed down to her. I also could refer to the hysteric’s frequent protest against her subjection to the Other, her dream of autonomy being nothing but the counterpart at the level of the ego of the alienation that results from her demand to be.

It also is at the level of the woman's phallic metaphor that we find what is most persuasive in the feminist objection. When such an objection emphasizes the early constraints that the culture's images and symbols foist upon women—in order to denounce them, no doubt—that objection is not wrong, and it was to Lacan's credit that he admitted this, something Freud never did. However, it must not be forgotten that this subjection is a function of demand. A logic is at work here that can be found in certain positions adopted by the most extreme contemporary American feminists. The September issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* presented a ferociously ironic review of a book by Marianne Hexter. Her thesis is quite extreme, indeed, since on the questions of rape and sexual harassment she intends to do away with the limit that most of her feminist sisters think define sexual abuse—namely, nonconsensual sex. She sees that as an arbitrary dividing line and criticizes the sexual relationship itself—whether consensual or not—as the fundamental cause of feminine alienation. To be sure, this extremism might seem ridiculous, but it is not without its logic, since the alienation in question is a function of sexual demand.

What are Freud's and Lacan's positions on this point? They diverge. Freud was not exposed to the hard-core feminists of our time. This is unfortunate, because it is rather amusing to imagine his reaction. What is certain is that when he constructed his "masculinity complex," he did not do so without a certain contempt, and he betrays a note of clear reprobation. In his eyes, the only suitable destiny for a woman—namely, the assumption of castration—is to be a man's wife.

On the contrary, Lacan always endeavored to distinguish the psychoanalyst from the master and to remove from psychoanalysis any and every normative exigency, leaving only the sole constraints imposed by structure. This orientation prevails with respect to women when he affirms in "L'Étourdit" that he does not make the relation to castration that conditions the sexual link to man an "obligation." This can be stated in the following way: in the eyes of the analyst, the only thing that is obligatory is what it is impossible to avoid. This is not true of the relationship between the sexes, for this relationship is merely possible. The mistake in Freud's position becomes evident when he tries to measure women, as Lacan says, with the same "yardstick" [*la toise*]<sup>4</sup> as men. He notes that the 1970s' women's liberation movement bears witness to this, "although sporadically, I'm afraid," he adds ("L'Étourdit," 21).

We might well wonder about the origin of this divergence between Freud and Lacan. Is it simply a question of taste, or even bias, Lacan's greater liberalism being a function of the change in mentality since Freud's time? I think not. Why would we assume that one had less prejudices than the other? Nothing indicates anything of the sort. Nevertheless, by taking structural terms further than Freud did, Lacan succeeded more than Freud in isolating the logical constraints of structure and their difference from ideal norms.

This does not mean that no objection can be made to the feminist argument. The main one, which deprives their militant position of its meaning,

seems to me that they are certainly free to reject the company of men—this is a question of taste—but they will not free themselves from the problematic of the phallus for all that, because this problematic is tied to speech itself. Once the signifier is in the Other of discourse, it plays a role in even the slightest demand made to any other, whether man or woman, beginning especially with the mother—who, as Freud saw, is central here.

### “FEMININE DESIRE”

If a woman “is the phallus,” her position in the sexual couple—where she is inscribed only by “allowing herself to be desired,” according to an expression that Lacan uses at times—her position as the partner of masculine desire, leaves the question of her own desire unanswered. Hence, Freud’s conundrum when, after so many years spent saying “They want the phallus,” he finally asked his famous question: “What does a woman want?”<sup>5</sup>

The expression of feminine desire is problematic. Freud’s doctrine at least had the merit of distinguishing between all of the desires that women can possibly have and what would constitute a feminine desire, strictly speaking. Desire as such is a phenomenon of the subject, related to castration; hence, its essential correlation with not having [*manque à avoir*], which is not specifically feminine. This is why, moreover, the notion of the “masculinity complex” is not only tainted with prejudice but conceptually confused. There is nothing specifically feminine about the desire to acquire or appropriate, which also is found in men as a metonymy of their having the penis, but it need not be forbidden to women, whether wealth, power, or influence is at stake—in short, the phallic quests of everyday life. On this point, the difference between Freud and Lacan is quite apparent. Lacan was not hostile to women, either in his texts or in the analyses he conducted, and he was hardly inclined, it seems, to discourage them from acquiring whatever they wanted, as long as it was possible.

Nevertheless, for a desire to be properly feminine, if there is any sense in using such a term, would be an entirely different matter. Freud only understands it as a variation on the desire to have—in the form of having a man’s love or a male child. Beyond that, he throws in the towel. Lacan, on the other hand, tries to answer the question, even before Seminar XX, in which he addresses it explicitly. In “Guiding Remarks,” he attempts a sort of deduction of that desire. Curiously, even paradoxically—and I am surprised it is not emphasized more often—it is in the course of his considerations on feminine homosexuality that he introduces it.

His presentation takes place in several steps. Far from attributing to a homosexual woman a supposed renunciation of femininity, he emphasizes on the contrary that femininity is her primary interest, evoking the facts brought to light by Jones who “clearly detected the link here between the fantasy of man, the invisible witness, and the care taken by the subject in giving her partner jouissance” (*Écrits*, 735/97). This means that, if a female homosexual competes

as a subject with a man, it is with the intention of exalting femininity—with the proviso that she locates femininity in her partner. Lacan next remarks on the “natural ease with which such women claim to be men,” and then adds: “Perhaps we see thereby the doorway that leads from feminine sexuality to desire itself” (ibid.). (This is a remarkable sentence that would be inapplicable to men, since their path leads from desire to the sexual act itself and not the other way around.) Lacan thus moves from women’s “playing the part of the man,” in sexual activity itself or elsewhere, to the affirmation of the erotic desire that identifies them, as though in their “playing the part of the man” they reveal what a woman as such expects from her partner.

This desire manifests itself as “the effort of a *jouissance* enveloped in its own contiguity [ . . . ] in order to be *realized in competition* with the desire that castration liberates in the male” (ibid.). This is Lacan’s answer, at the time, to the famous question, “What does a woman want?”: she has a desire that is quite foreign to any interest in having but is not a demand for being either. It is defined as equivalent, if not to a will, at least to an aim of *jouissance* [*une visée de jouissance*].<sup>6</sup> But it is a specific *jouissance* that is excepted from the “discrete” and thus limited character of phallic *jouissance* proper. It is more than a simple wish, application, or “effort” that competes. I would willingly risk formulating it as follows: “enjoying [*jouir*] as much as he desires.” Note, moreover, that the expression “in competition with” [*à l’envi*], which connotes emulation, is redoubled on the following page when Lacan observes that, in the sexual relationship, the “appellants of the fairer sex,” and “desire’s supporters”—that is, women and men respectively—“act [ . . . ] as rivals” (*Écrits*, 736/97).

## THE UNCONSCIOUS AND FEMININE JOUISSANCE

This answer to the question of desire still does not address the question of what the unconscious knows of feminine *jouissance*. Lacan provided three terms that, in the unconscious, have *jouissance* as their referent. The first term is obviously the Phallus, written here with a capital *P*. The unconscious knows something about phallic *jouissance*, which is a signifier-syntonic<sup>7</sup> *jouissance*. Like the signifier, phallic *jouissance* is discrete and fragmented; it allows of greater and lesser amounts and can be appropriated by men or women, even though there is certainly a dissymmetry between the sexes when it comes to phallic *jouissance*. The second term is “surplus *jouissance*” or object *a*, which is not the partner in the couple but the object as cause of desire. This object, which is concealed within the partner, was first formulated by psychoanalytic theory as a partial object. This object as cause is not independent of the phallic problematic, since it intervenes as a complement that compensates for the phallic lack resulting from castration—this is inscribed in the structure of fantasy. This is why, when Lacan evokes feminine *jouissance*, he indicates that it is not caused by an object *a*. Lacan’s third term is *S(A)*, and he teaches us to read it as “the signifier of a lack in the Other” (*Écrits*, 818/316). It is a signifier, but one



that paradoxically is not in the Other. We can equally say that it is the signifier of the jouissance of the Other, insofar as that jouissance is foreclosed from the Other of the signifier, which only inscribes the phallic signifier.

We can situate women quite easily in relation to these three terms. Phallic jouissance is certainly accessible to women—Freud noted that long ago, and Lacan does not contradict him. With respect to object *a*, it is the child who eminently incarnates it for them. Lastly, there is what Lacan in Seminar XX calls other jouissance foreclosed from the symbolic, a jouissance that can be qualified as “outside the unconscious.” The unconscious knows nothing of this jouissance. It is manifest in the experience of the sexual relationship and also in mystical love, but it cannot be translated in terms of unconscious knowledge. Unlike phallic jouissance, it is not caused by an object correlated with castration and in this sense cannot be measured. This is why Lacan says in “L’Étourdit” that it is “beyond” the subject [*le sujet en est dépassé*]. In contrast, phallic jouissance is not beyond the subject. I will not claim that phallic jouissance is homeostatic, because it can be disturbing and rise to the level of pathos, as we know, but it remains proportionate to the subject [*à la mesure du sujet*], just like object *a*, which certainly divides the subject but is adjusted to his gap.

What use can the analyst make of these indications? Can the foreclosed other jouissance be analyzed? I would say that, although the unconscious knows nothing of this jouissance, this is not an objection to analysis—for one analyzes the subject and not jouissance itself. It is no accident that analysis has led to an emphasis on phallic jouissance, for its practice is only concerned with jouissance that is filtered through the signifier [*passée au signifiant*].<sup>8</sup> On that basis, analysis reveals that there is a remainder, and that the whole of jouissance can never be said. I would conclude, then, that it is not necessary that the unconscious know more, for this more—a quantity—merely makes all the more tormenting what is Other, which the Other does not know.

Translated by François Raffoul and David Pettigrew,  
revised and edited by Bruce Fink.

## NOTES

1. See Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., trans. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press), “Female Sexuality,” vol. XXI, 229–30 and “Femininity,” vol. XXII, 126–30. All notes here are editor’s or translator’s notes.

2. All references to *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) will be simply indicated in the text as *Écrits*, followed first by the French page number and then by the page number in the corresponding English translation: either *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, trans. J. Rose (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1982), or *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1977). All translations have been modified, often significantly, to reflect the new forthcoming translation of *Écrits* by Bruce Fink.

3. Lacan, "L'Étourdit," *Scilicet* 4 (1973): 5–52.

4. The French here refers to an instrument for measuring height. Figuratively, it suggests holding someone to one's own standards or measuring someone up against oneself and one's own conceptions.

5. From a letter to Princess Marie Bonaparte.

6. Note that *visée* (aim) is one of the four components of the drive, according to Freud. The French here also might be translated as "an aiming at jouissance," or "a jouissance aim."

7. In the sense that one says "ego-syntonic."

8. Or, "that has been signifierized."